

Disfranchisement

After the euphoria of election victory settled and the state returned to relative calm, calls for disfranchisement of the black vote arose. The *News and Observer* proclaimed that the “the lessons of the recent past teach that it is neither prudent nor wise to delay a permanent solution of the suffrage problem.” As the voice of the Democratic Party, the paper acknowledged that “the people have voted to put an end” to black suffrage and its complement of “problems” for white voters. Further, the paper saw the overwhelming Democratic victory as a mandate for the new legislature to “settle once and all time the question of regulating suffrage.”⁶³

In response to the call by Democratic Party leaders for limits on suffrage, the General Assembly manufactured legislation under the hands of George Rountree, Francis Winston, and others as a solution to the perceived “problem” of black voting.⁶⁴ The suffrage amendment went through several mutations before it was ratified by the General Assembly on February 21, 1899. The amendment was based on similar legislation passed in other states and relied on recent court decisions that supported the rights of states to disfranchise citizens through literacy tests.⁶⁵ Opposition to the

bill came from Populists who claimed that the scheme’s plan to disfranchise those who would fail to qualify to vote possibly would ensnare some white men and remove their ability to vote. Democrats conceded that some whites would have to sacrifice their vote for the greater good of the white population. The final version of the suffrage amendment required voters to pass a literacy test and pay a poll tax. To assure skeptics that illiterate whites would not be disfranchised, the amendment included a grandfather clause: “[N]o male person who was on January 1, 1867, or at any time prior thereto, entitled to vote under the laws of the state in the United States wherein he then resided, and no lineal descendent of such person, shall be denied the right to register to vote at any election in this State by reason of his failure to pass the education qualification.” A codicil to the grandfather clause was that it was only effective through December 1, 1908. After that date, all men who were not already registered would have to pass the literacy test. The amendment as constructed in the legislature went to the voters for passage during the November general elections.⁶⁶

Blacks reacted to the suffrage amendment in various ways, reflecting the ideological split between various national factions. Men such as Wilmington’s John C. Dancy, who sought peaceful accommodation of the stronger white demands for limited suffrage, voiced their concerns cautiously. Over 80 of these men, including Dancy and Congressman George White, met in Raleigh ask that legislators not “blunt our aspirations, ruin our manhood

⁶³ *News and Observer* (Raleigh), November 23, 1898.

⁶⁴ In this context, the “negro problem” centered on the rights of blacks to vote, and the argument was made that blacks should not have been given the right to vote as soon as they were granted freedom after the Civil War, but, instead, the right to vote should be earned through dutiful employment and proper education. For an argument posited by whites concerning black suffrage, see Rountree’s “Memorandum of My Personal Reasons for the Passage of the Suffrage Amendment to the Constitution” in the Henry G. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

⁶⁵ In an 1898 court case, *Williams v. Mississippi*, the United States Supreme Court sanctioned the right of

a state to disfranchise its citizens by means of a literacy test. The primary purpose of the test was aimed at eliminating the black vote, but the court declared it legal because the law never mentioned race. Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 304.

⁶⁶ *Wilmington Messenger*, December 2, 1898; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 780-9.